

# FACING FEARS AND MOVING TOWARDS FREEDOM

## A post-traumatic growth approach

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**F**ear is a universal human experience, one we all encounter at various points in life. As clinicians and counsellors, our role is to help clients navigate their fears, especially when those fears are linked to trauma, anxiety, or life's unpredictable nature. Supporting clients to face their fears and move towards freedom is about far more than fear management. It's about helping them grow, cultivate hope, and find meaning, even in the darkest moments.

In this article, we'll explore practical ways to support clients in confronting their fears, with a focus on post-traumatic growth (PTG), hope, and the power of meaning-making. And because facing fears doesn't have to be all grim, let's leave room for a bit of lightness and play along the way.

### FEAR AS A GATEWAY TO HEALING AND GROWTH

Let's start by reframing fear. Instead of viewing fear as the enemy, we can look at it as a signal — one that tells us where our attention is needed. When fear takes over, its job is to protect — a very important job that sometimes gives fear a bad rap! But fear also often traps clients in avoidance patterns or keeps them hypervigilant, always bracing for the worst.

As counsellors, our goal is to help clients step closer to their fears in manageable ways, encouraging them to be curious rather than reactive. Shifting the narrative from “fear is something to be eliminated” to “fear is something to be understood” can open the door to growth and transformation. We must do this in a slow and steady way to ensure the process contributes to the client's healing

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instead of retraumatizing them or causing significant regressions.

Consider Sarah, a client who came to therapy after experiencing severe workplace burnout. The stress of the job not only overwhelmed her, but it also triggered deep childhood traumas, aspects from which she hadn't yet fully healed. Initially, Sarah wanted nothing more than to escape her anxiety. After some time focusing on grounding and stabilization, she was able to do some deeper trauma healing, and she began to realize her fear wasn't just about burnout — it was also pointing to old wounds that needed attention. The fears were the gateway for healing those wounds. By gradually exploring these fears, Sarah was able to heal at multiple levels. Instead of avoiding her fear, she learned to face it in small, intentional steps.

Truly amazing, isn't it? Given the right set up and support, we are made to heal. Even when there aren't permanent marks from trauma (scars), we can find ways to become renewed versions of ourselves through healing.

#### **FROM TRAUMA TO GROWTH**

One of the most empowering ways to reframe fear for clients is by introducing the concept of PTG. PTG refers to the positive psychological changes that can occur after a person endures trauma. It's not about minimizing the trauma itself or suggesting that suffering is necessary for growth, but rather about acknowledging that some people can emerge from their darkest moments stronger and more resilient.

For clients who feel stuck in their fear or trauma, PTG offers hope. It shows them that while trauma leaves scars, it can also provide an opportunity for transformation. Just breathe that in. Trauma can be a gateway for transformation.

For Sarah, part of her growth was recognizing how burnout had pushed her to reevaluate her life. She realized that her job wasn't just stressful, it was also



misaligned with her values. As she healed from burnout, she developed a new appreciation for boundaries, self-care, and purpose in her work. This wasn't a lesson she wanted, but it became a profound source of growth. In her growth, she fell in love with a version of herself she never anticipated meeting.

### THE POWER OF HOPE

Hope is often the lifeline clients need when facing their deepest fears. Without hope, fear feels insurmountable, like a mountain too high to climb. Sometimes clients struggle to feel or find hope. I

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have told clients I will “hold the space for hope” for them until they find it. Even hearing me believe they will find their hope can bring clients closer to hope. With hope, clients start to believe that change is possible, even if it's slow or incremental.

In therapy, hope is cultivated by celebrating small victories. A client who begins to set boundaries, take time for self-care, or push back against avoidance is moving towards freedom even if the steps seem small. Ensure you practice/ prep your happy/celebration dance for when clients find victories! Every celebration deserves acknowledgement. Bring your dance into the room with you and encourage your client to find their happy/celebration dance, too.

Take Sarah again — when she started to establish small boundaries at work,

she felt like she wasn't making enough progress. But each tiny step forward gave her more strength to take the next one. Recognizing these wins, even the small ones, is crucial in maintaining momentum and reminding clients that they are capable of change.

### FINDING AND MAKING MEANING IN THE MIDST OF FEAR

Viktor Frankl, psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, wisely observed, “Those who have a ‘why’ to live can bear with almost any ‘how.’”

Meaning-making is what helps clients transform fear from a debilitating experience into an opportunity for self-understanding and growth. It helps them find a sense of purpose even in pain.

Clients often ask, “Why did this happen to me?” While we may not have answers



— despite our most engaging existential explorations — we can help them explore what this fear or trauma might mean for their lives now.

Some clients find meaning through relationships, art, or helping others; others may find meaning in embracing the unknown and learning to sit with uncertainty. Sarah found meaning by reshaping her relationship to work. Burnout forced her to confront childhood wounds where she felt she had to “prove” her worth. By addressing this, she realized she no longer needed to define herself through achievement alone. Meaning was no longer in pushing herself past the breaking point, but in understanding her own worth, independent of external validation.

### **PRACTICAL STRATEGIES TO HELP CLIENTS FACE FEAR**

With growth, hope, and meaning as key elements of the therapeutic process, here are some practical strategies (this list is not extensive) to help clients face their fears:

**1. Gradual exposure:** Start small and go slow. Clients benefit from facing their fears step by step, at their own pace. Honour their pace. For Sarah, this meant setting small, attainable boundaries at work and learning to sit with the discomfort of saying no. Each small step brought her closer to reclaiming her power.

**2. Mindfulness and grounding techniques:** Fear often hijacks the present moment. Simple grounding techniques — such as focusing on the breath, feeling the ground under your feet, or noticing sensory details — can help clients stay in the now instead of getting lost in the what ifs. It is very important to ensure the client has some grounding techniques to use out of the office before exploring deeper work with fear.

**3. Cognitive restructuring:** Help clients challenge their fearful thoughts. Fear tends to distort thinking into catastrophic worst-case scenarios. Cognitive restructuring helps clients identify these distortions and replace them with more balanced, realistic thoughts. See if you can weave in some humour here. I have known many people who have found brilliant wisdom with imaginary “shrink-ray guns” that counteract fearful thoughts.

**4. Narrative therapy:** Encourage clients to tell their story from a place of strength. Narrative therapy allows clients to see themselves as the author of their own life, not merely a victim of circumstance. When Sarah began to tell her story, she realized that while her fears had shaped her, they didn’t have to define her. She began to see herself not just as burned out but as someone who was reclaiming her power. Pointing out themes and encouraging clients to hear the themes under the stories can be so powerful.

### **A LITTLE PLAYFULNESS CAN GO A LONG WAY**

While facing fears is serious business, a little lightheartedness can help clients process difficult emotions. I once had a client who was terrified of assertiveness, convinced that standing up for herself would be met with hostility. To lighten the mood, I suggested we role-play her standing up to people in silly scenarios. One day, she had to assert her boundaries with a duck. We both laughed but through the humour, she learned how to hold her ground.

Humour, creativity, and playfulness can make the process of facing fears less daunting and remind clients that they are more than their anxieties. It offers a safe way to experiment with courage and resilience.

## **LEARN MORE**

### **Recommended Readings:**

- *The Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel van der Kolk
- *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl
- *Radical Acceptance* by Tara Brach

### **Recommended Podcast:**

- *Unlocking Us* with Brené Brown — Brown dives into conversations about vulnerability, fear, and resilience with a variety of guests.

### **Recommended TED Talk:**

- Kelly McGonigal's Ted Talk: How to Make Stress Your Friend — McGonigal explains how changing our perception of stress and fear can transform our health and well-being.

## **MOVING TOWARDS FREEDOM**

Supporting clients to face their fears isn’t about teaching them how to eliminate fear altogether. That’s a narrative I think many folks believe. Facing fear, building courage, and finding freedom is about being terrified and facing fears anyway — of course, in a supportive and grounded way. It’s about helping them learn to live with fear in a way that doesn’t stifle their potential for growth, joy, or freedom. By focusing on PTG, cultivating hope, and helping clients make meaning from their experiences, we can empower them to turn fear into an ally. With a bit of play along the way, we remind them that even in the midst of fear, there is space for joy, laughter, and connection. ■

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